

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,

Prepare ye the way of the Lord,

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be exalted,

And every mountain and hill shall be brought low,

And the crooked shall be made straight,

And the rough places plain;

And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

And all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

Our readings today have been traditionally associated with the season of Advent. As I have studied them I've found them to be for us at this time and in this place to be providential, if you will pardon the expression.

We are used to processions and motorcades of the rich and powerful. They involve many people. They involve major disruptions as they move through major cities. Interestingly enough the reading from Isaiah recalls the movement of a major figure, a conqueror – and the multitudes of his great army – moving through the rough, unsettled countryside of a backwater country such as Israel in the times of Isaiah. Such movements did not occur that often hence were memorable when they did. As there was no real system of roads to support the movement of large number of soldiers as well as countless animals and supporting individuals. Also, there would be tremendous amounts of food and other logistical supplies to be moved. So to accomplish all of this there would need to be roads constructed. In the doing of that the ground would be levelled and major depressions filled in. Trails and pathways meandering here and there would be straightened into broad passageways for the movement of the marauding invaders. In Isaiah's day Israel was the invariable loser in contests with the surrounding great powers.

So it was a great irony for Isaiah to write of the One who was to come in victory and glory – a time of great joy – in the same terms describing the movement of the conquering invaders who brought great violence and destruction to the people of the land as they moved through.

It was incongruous in the times in which it was written – and seems incongruous to us in our own times when there seems to be a falling away from religion generally and from Christian churches specifically.

Why this falling away?

Recently I read something about a play currently running at the Lincoln Center in NYC. The reviewer suggests the play asks the question, “Are the materialists right, or is there more to man than mere flesh?” (1) Were we created by Something or Someone and is there some meaning or purpose to our living? Is there more to us than our body and our being here is more than the random happenstance of nature? The title of the play is *The Hard Problem*. The reviewer further comments “the play put[s] the viewer in mind of Dostoyevsky’s remark, ‘If there is no God, everything is permitted...’” In a conversation in the play one of the main characters asks another ‘What is God for?’ The other character suggests that if for no other reason than for us to tell right from wrong, “You need for something ... to be true, some kind of overall moral intelligence, otherwise we’re just marking our own homework.” If there is no Creator, or no God, who sets the rules? Or are there any? If not, why not stay home on Sunday mornings and read the paper.

And I suspect that many more people today find church, the Christian faith irrelevant. When they think about it – and maybe that’s not too often given the great distractions and entertainments of our time – and, frankly, maybe not the greatest presentation of the Christian faith by some of its proponents – they would agree that what you see is all there is – they would agree with a materialist point of view.

But what are people interested in – even those who find church irrelevant?

Let me suggest a couple out of many I am sure – and maybe they are related. People like to be with other people. And sort of related to that many people are interested in finding one person out of those many people that they can be with a whole lot of time – sort of indefinitely as in a lifetime, say.

I suspect that on a given weeknight – and maybe especially on a weekend night – that there are a lot of people spending time and money in places where they can meet other people. People like people. And people tend to like people – generally speaking – who are friendly, kind, honest, keep their word, enjoy life – and maybe without making a show of it - who try to do the right thing most of the time. Oh, and show a little courage sometimes when necessary. And many of them are looking for someone with whom they can spend some serious time with.

And in that I suspect many come to realize that there is something utterly marvelous, utterly wonderful, in other people – particularly maybe in the one, that special one, that one especially wants to be with. So wonderful, so special that only a god could have made that one. Or rather, so wonderful, so special that only God could have made that one. And that the things that make that one so special – that one’s kindness, or beauty, or joy, or love, are not things that can be measured or weighed – but are part of that one’s special creation by God.

The writers of the Commentaries do not know, or do not agree, in what prison Paul was held when he wrote those great words of love we read in imperfect form in the verses from Philippians. It could have been Rome, maybe even Caesarea on the Sea.

"I thank ...God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you...[I hold you in my heart just as](2)you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in defense and confirmation of the gospel....I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more...

As happens from time to time there are various conversations going on about this and that. We are having what are called cottage meetings in which we have an opportunity to talk about various things including things on our mind.

As I zip to North Little Rock from the further regions of far North Pulaski County on the route on 67/167 that my truck takes automatically since I was sent to you the last Season of Lent and I make that gentle curve to the right just before I-40 I see a great view of the Little Rock skyline and to the right large new apartment houses that are going up. People, many people will be living in those apartment houses soon. Indeed, there are a lot of new apartments and condo buildings in which many new people to North Little Rock already live.

We celebrate the message of Advent which is that Christ has come into the world for each one of us. He also has come into the world for each one of them. Maybe they should be the subject of part of our conversation as well.

"This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more...."

Amen.

Richard Robertson

- (1) Article from the Wall Street Journal of November 23, 2018, "Goodness Has Everything To Do With It."
- (2) Interpretation Bible Commentary – Philippians.